

A CLOSER LOOK

By Patrick Isakson



Harold Umber

DRILLING DYNAMOS

North Dakota is home to some of the most accomplished drillers around. They're unique in that they are not looking for water or oil, but insects. These talented excavators are not human, but woodpeckers that inhabit woodlands and back yards.

A handful of woodpecker species inhabit North Dakota throughout the year. The most common are the downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker and northern flicker. The hairy and downy look similar. Both have white backs and bellies, and sport black wings with white spots or bars. The downy is smaller of the two, about six inches long, or the size of a house sparrow.

The northern flicker has a light underside with black spots, brown barred wings and a distinctive black face marking that resembles a mustache. Other species seen in North Dakota include the red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker and the large, but not so common, pileated woodpecker.

Playing the part of nature's jackhammer, the woodpecker uses its hard chisel-like beak and rapid head movement to "drill" into tree bark in search of food or to hollow out a cavity to nest in. It can be dirty work, but the woodpecker has bristly feathers around its nostrils to keep wood dust out. To absorb the constant shock of chiseling, the birds have reinforced skulls.

Drilling is also a means of communication. Known as drumming, the male woodpecker hammers on a dead tree to announce its presence to females in spring, or to warn males that trespassers better beware.

Woodpeckers have strong toes that point both forward and backward, allowing for a better grip on bark as they move up the tree. Many have such a strong grip they can actually walk on the underside of branches. Their tail feathers are stiffer than most birds, providing better balance when pressed against the tree. Woodpeckers also have long, barbed, sticky tongues for extracting insects burrowed deep inside trees.

Most of North Dakota's woodpeckers can be seen or heard year-round. They are one of the few birds to brave our winters. The next time you see a woodpecker in your back yard you can take some pride in the fact that nature's most talented drillers call North Dakota home.

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